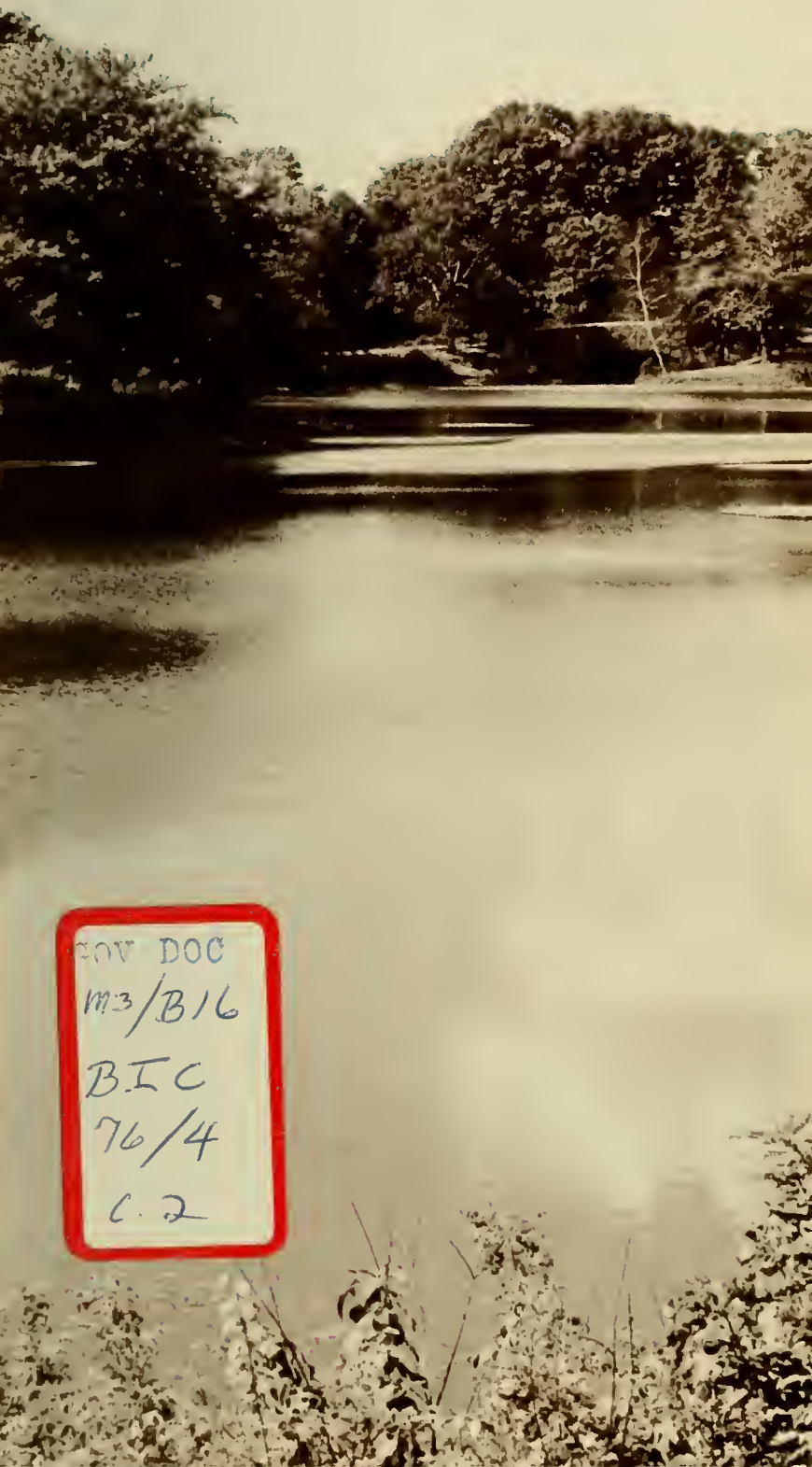


Franklin Park



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Franklin Park: A Brief History



Frederick Law Olmsted

"... whatever grounds a great city may need for public purposes ... it also needs a large ground scientifically and artistically prepared to provide a poetic and tranquilizing influence on its people as comes through a contemplation of natural scenery ..."

Frederick Law Olmsted
in a letter to architect
Henry Van Brunt

Throughout his long career, Olmsted was convinced that only large, unspoiled stretches of country could counteract the dehumanizing effects of modern city life. He felt that the physical and mental health of urban men and women depended on their remaining in contact with the natural world. Olmsted was not content to provide only playgrounds, athletic fields and other functional public spaces. He maintained that all large cities needed a "country park" of several hundred acres.



Clearing of Franklin Park, circa 1886.



Playstead Overlook under construction, circa 1886.

Olmsted's career began, when, in collaboration with Calvert Vaux, he designed Central Park in New York City in 1857-1858. By 1878, when he was appointed Landscape Architect Advisor to the Boston Park Commission, Olmsted had been practicing for twenty years and was the foremost landscape architect in the country. Although he designed many types of public and private grounds, including college campuses, private estates, suburban subdivisions and the grounds of public buildings like the United States Capitol, he was most renowned for his large public parks.

Before 1857, Olmsted had been employed as a ship's hand, a farmer, an engineer and a newspaper correspondent. In 1850, Olmsted visited Europe for the first time. He was not yet a landscape architect, but was a sensitive observer of the local scene. In England he first saw public parks, and was particularly impressed by Birkenhead, a park on the outskirts of Liverpool, of which he wrote:

"... In America, there was nothing comparable with this People's Garden ... all this magnificent pleasure-ground is the people's. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it as the British queen."

Olmsted's appointment by the Boston Park Commission in 1878 climaxed almost ten years of an energetic park movement in Boston. Inspired by the success of Central Park and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, also designed by Olmsted and Vaux, Boston citizens began petitioning for parks in 1869. In 1875, the Boston Park Commission was established and, in 1876, published a comprehensive report advising a connected system of parks for the city.



Ellicott Arch, 1892.



Circuit Drive (foreground) and G

In 1875, the city had only the Common and Public Garden, totalling about 75 acres, for public space, and there was no room in the older part of the city for a "central" park. However, Boston had recently annexed several suburban towns and cities, most of them still rural and undeveloped, and it was reasonable to plan the larger parks in these new districts. The Park Commissioners suggested tentative sites in their first report, and among them was a site for a park of several hundred acres in newly annexed West Roxbury.

"West Roxbury Park," as it was called, consisted of a dozen parcels of land, mostly small farms or homesteads, belonging to the Williams, Sargent, Ellicott and other families. Its main feature was a wide valley surrounded by low hills and picturesque outcroppings of Roxbury puddingstone. The spot was secluded, peaceful, and had agreeable views of the Blue Hills of Milton.

Olmsted liked this site for the main park of the Boston system. In January of 1886, Olmsted presented his plan for "Franklin Park," (it was renamed in honor of Benjamin Franklin), to Mayor Hugh O'Brien, the Park Commissioners and various other city dignitaries.



Course, 1903.

Olmsted worked on the plan of Franklin Park for over a year as the most critical unit in the park system. The wide valley and its surrounding hills Olmsted called the "Country Park," or the park proper. It was to be reserved exclusively for the enjoyment of natural scenery. This was revised in the early nineties to include Scarborough Pond.

Many sections of the park had specialized uses. The "Playstead" was a turf playing field for schoolboy sports, and the "Greeting" was planned for promenading on foot, horseback and carriage. Other areas were set aside for a playground for very small children ("The Little Folks' Fair"), an amphitheatre for concerts, a deer park and a small zoological garden.

Topographical features were given names that evoked earlier owners: "Ellicottdale," "Heathfield," and "Abbottsford". "Nazingdale" in the Country Park was named after a part of Essex County, England from which many of the early Roxbury settlers had emigrated. "Schoolmaster Hill" was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, as a young man, taught school in Roxbury.

Franklin Park was executed with as much care as it had been planned. The Olmsted firm set up a field office in the park and supervised every detail of construction.



Entrance to Playstead Overlook from Sigourney Street, circa 1900.

The original structures of Franklin Park were exceptionally fine, and many are still standing, including Overlook Terrace, a boulder platform originally meant for spectators of games on the Playstead and now used for the Elma Lewis Playhouse-in-the-Park. The formal Greeting was never built exactly as planned and now contains the Zoo. The Country Park is now used for golf, and White Stadium was built in the turf Playstead. The planting in Franklin Park used native New England trees and shrubs predominantly.

The fundamentally English inspiration of Franklin Park was apparent in many details. The Country Park was kept closely cropped by a flock of sheep, and was stocked with peacocks until nearby residents complained of their screaming. It was Olmsted's synthesis of Birkenhead Park and rural New England. When completed, Franklin Park was a democratic, American "People's Garden" open to all the citizens of the City of Boston.

"Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; . . . let us think . . . that a time is to come when . . . men will say 'See! this our fathers did for us!'"

(John Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, quoted by Olmsted in *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park*)



Sheep grazing on Golf Course.



Schoolmaster Hill Overlook Terrace, 1905.



Home of Frederick Law Olmsted, now the office of Olmsted Associates.



Children's Zoo.



Horseback riders in the Wilderness.

Welcome to Franklin Park...

Available Activities and Recreation Facilities

Franklin Park is for the recreational enjoyment of the citizens of Boston. We hope you will take advantage soon of some of the following activities and recreational facilities.

1. Picnic area with barbecue grills
2. Horseback riding
3. Baseball
4. Elma Lewis Playhouse
5. Basketball
6. Track and field events (White Stadium)
7. Tot lot
8. Football and soccer
9. Zoo and wildlife education programs
10. Golf Club House
11. Bicycle riding
12. Greenhouses and classes in horticulture (by appt. only) 542-3362
13. Cross country skiing
14. Licensed fishing
15. Tennis
16. Sledding
17. Natural wilderness area
Jogging
Kite flying
Roller skating

The new Zoological Garden at Franklin Park, a joint venture by the Boston Zoological Society and the Metropolitan District Commission, will cover 70 acres and will extend from Blue Hill Avenue to the Bird's World complex adjoining the White Stadium area. This year-round educational facility will have more than 7 acres of natural habitat under cover. The four large "pavilions" planned will each contain more area than a football field, and will house a bush forest, a rain forest, a savanna, and a desert, each with mammals, reptiles, birds, insects, and suitable plants and trees.

When you do go to Franklin Park, please be thoughtful of others. Put paper, cans, bottles, and other litter in the proper trash receptacles. Franklin Park was planned with great care, let's all use it with care.

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Bus
16/2

Walnut
Entrance

Street

7.

White
Stadium

3.

4.
Overlook

Crouch
Woods

5.

3.

The Playstead

Bus 44

picnic

2.

1.

Grounds

3.

8.

7.

Parking

Valley
Gates

Bird's World
Exhibit

Schoolmaster
Hill Overlook

Circuit
Drive

Glen Road

Emerson Rock

Animal
Exhibit

Zoo
9.

gh

Golf Course

Sargent
Tower

Children's
Zoo

Parking

"The Country Park"

10.

Parking

Bus
45

Entrance

11.

Jogging Path →

Blue Hill Avenue

↑
Egleston
Orange Line
Station
T

mboldt Ave



Scarborough Pond Carriage Bridge.



Emerson Rock on Schoolmaster Hill.



Boston 200™

Directions to Franklin Park

Take the Orange Line. Get off at Egleston Station and take the Franklin Park bus to the Blue Hill Avenue entrance of the Park. Also take the Orange Line: to the Forest Hills stop and walk up to the Forest Hills entrance.

The Future

Although Franklin Park has moved far from its Olmstedian sources, much of its integrity and visual character have survived. Particularly encouraging has been the movement in recent years to revitalize Boston's greatest Olmsted park.

The Franklin Park Coalition is a citizen's group laboring to preserve the Park and to remind public officials of its importance. To continue these activities, the Franklin Park Coalition needs YOUR support and active involvement. For further information on the Park and on how you can help, write: The Franklin Park Coalition, c/o The Boston Zoological Society, Dorchester Massachusetts 02121



Steps in the Wilderness.

Credits:

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Quotations:

1. Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
2. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, London, 1852.
3. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters*, Boston, 1886.

Boston 200 is the city's official program to observe the Bicentennial of the American Revolution from April 1975 through December 1976.

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